

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809-1849).

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Born in Boston on January 19, 1809, Edgar Allan Poe became a southerner by an act of fate. Already abandoned by his father, actor David Poe, Edgar was left an orphan in 1811 when his mother, actress Eliza Poe, died in Richmond, Virginia. There he was taken in by a well-to-do tobacco merchant, John Allan, and his wife, Frances. Although the Allans never formally adopted him, Poe spent his childhood and adolescence in their home, living with them in Richmond from 1811 to 1815, joining them for stints in Scotland and England between 1815 and 1820, and returning with them to Richmond in 1820.

In Richmond, he attended school and fell in love—first with a schoolmate's mother, Jane Stanard, who would inspire his poem "To Helen," and then with a neighbor girl named Elmira Royster. Engaged to Royster, Poe left for the University of Virginia in 1826, but both his engagement and his education faltered. Perhaps because he had not received adequate funds from Allan, Poe ran up gambling debts in Charlottesville and returned home in December.

After quarreling with Allan, Poe moved to Boston in 1827 and, under the name of Edgar A. Perry, enlisted in the U.S. Army. His first book, Tamerlane and Other Poems,

appeared anonymously a few months later, attracting little attention. Before the year was out, he returned to the south when his battery was transferred to Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, a South Carolina locale he would later use in his story "The Gold-Bug." Obtaining an honorable discharge in 1829, Poe moved to Baltimore and came out with Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems. Still largely unknown as a poet, he entered the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1830, but became dissatisfied and got himself expelled the following year. After a brief stay in New York City, where he published Poems, he moved in with his aunt Maria Clemm and her daughter, Virginia, in Baltimore.

Now somewhat settled back in the south, Poe's career began to take shape. While in Baltimore, he wrote six stories and submitted them to a contest in 1833. He won first place for "MS. Found in a Bottle" and, more importantly, drew the notice of one of the contest's judges, John Pendleton Kennedy. Encouraged by his new mentor, Poe wrote stories and reviews for Richmond's Southern Literary Messenger in 1835. The following year, Poe moved to Richmond and went to work for the *Messenger*. Over the next two years, he supplied it with reviews and stories, and the publication's circulation climbed. In 1836, he publicly married his cousin Virginia, then 13.

Despite their success, Poe broke with publisher Thomas White in 1837 and moved to New York, then to Philadelphia, where he worked for Burton's Gentleman's Magazine from 1839 to 1840 and Graham's Magazine from 1841 to 1842. Even as he performed his various editorial duties, which included writing reviews and reading proofs, Poe churned out fiction, producing some of his most memorable stories. During this time, Lea & Blanchard came out with Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, which contained "William Wilson," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and 23 other stories, many of which had already appeared in Burton's, Godey's Lady's Book, and other publications. Over his remaining years in Philadelphia, he published "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "The Tell-Tale Heart" in his own and other publications. Poe's fiction was by now attracting favorable attention from reviewers and readers alike. His 1843 story "The Gold-Bug" was especially successful, winning a \$100 prize and wide popular acclaim. He also began a successful lecturing career. On a personal level, however, the rising author was struggling and suffering. In 1842, his wife showed signs of tuberculosis. Meanwhile, poverty dogged the family, even while Poe's testy personality and drinking problems—perhaps the result of an

oversensitivity to alcohol—caused him to alienate potential supporters.

In 1844, Poe moved to New York City and joined the staff of the Evening Mirror. In 1845, the *Mirror* published "The Raven," which quickly became his most famous work. Later the same year, after he had moved to the Broadway Journal, Wiley and Putnam published Tales, which included "The Purloined Letter," "The Man of the Crowd," and 10 other stories. On the heels of this successful collection, the same publisher came out with The Raven and Other Poems. Meanwhile, Poe's personal problems continued, as he drank excessively, flopped at a public reading, and published a bizarre attack on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, accusing the poet of plagiarism. In Fordham, New York, where Poe moved the family in 1846, he suffered from illness, depression, and poverty as he watched Virginia's condition worsen. She died in 1847.

Poe's career was now in decline. Over the next two years, he produced only a handful of notable works, including Eureka and "Annabel Lee," while apparently trying to fill the void left by Virginia's death. He poured out his heart in letters to a married woman named Annie Richmond, confessing to a suicide attempt in 1848, and proposed to fellow poet Sarah Helen Whitman. In 1849, his

engagement to Whitman over, he returned to Richmond, where he reunited with Shelton. More than two decades after their first engagement failed, the two planned marriage again. On his way back north, perhaps to pick up Maria Clemm, Poe mysteriously turned up partly conscious near a polling booth in Baltimore on October 3. Although the cause of his death on October 7 was listed as "congestion of the brain," the full circumstances remain a mystery.

The downward slope of Poe's life and career continued even after his death, thanks largely to his literary executor, Rufus Griswold, who marked his erstwhile friend's passing with an obituary and "Memoir" portraying him as an unscrupulous madman. Later writers and scholars have resurrected Poe's reputation, and today he stands as one of the south's preeminent writers.

Mark Canada

WORKS: Tamerlane and Other Poems (1827). Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems (1829). Poems (1831). The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838). The Conchologist's First Book (1839). Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840). The Prose Romances of Edgar A. Poe (1843). Tales (1845). The Raven and Other Poems (1845). Eureka: A Prose Poem (1848).